

Message Text

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ACTION EA-14

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-07 H-03 INR-10 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-07 PA-04 RSC-01 PRS-01 SPC-03 SS-20

USIA-15 OMB-01 DRC-01 /091 W
----- 048459

R 220211Z MAR 74

FM AMEMBASSY CANBERRA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2837

INFO AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON

AMCONSUL BRISBANE

AMCONSUL MELBOURNE

AMCONSUL PERTH

AMCONSUL SYDNEY

CINCPAC

CINCPACREP AUSTRALIA

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CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, AS

SUBJECT: AUSTRALIAN SENATE ELECTIONS SET FOR MAY 18;
FOUR REFERENDUM PROPOSALS ALSO TO BE VOTED ON

1. SUMMARY: PRIME MINISTER WHITLAM ANNOUNCED MAR 21 THAT ELECTIONS FOR HALF OF AUSTRALIAN SENATE WILL BE HELD MAY 18. THIRTY SEATS UP FOR RE-ELECTION COULD DECIDE FATE OF MAJOR LABOR GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS, NUMBER OF WHICH HAVE BEEN REJECTED OR DELAYED BY SENATE. HOWEVER, MOST OBSERVERS CONSIDERING LABOR PROSPECTS TO GAIN CONTROL OF SENATE ARE NOT PROMISING. LABOR PROSPECTS ARE UNFAVORABLY AFFECTED BY FACT THAT WHITLAM, OVER OPPOSITION OF NUMBER OF ALP LEADERS, HAS PRESSED FOR FOUR COMPLEX CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES TO BE PUT ON BALLOT IN FORM OF REFERENDUM PROPOSALS. MOST OBSERVERS EXPECT THESE REFERENDUM PROPOSALS TO BE DEFEATED AND FOR THE

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ALP TO SUFFER CORRESPONDINGLY IN ELECTORAL TERMS.

END SUMMARY.

2. PRIME MINISTER WHITLAM ANNOUNCED IN PARLIAMENT MAR 21 THAT REQUIRE ELECTIONS FOR 30 SEATS IN 60-MEMBER FEDERAL SENATE WOULD BE HELD MAY 18. PRIME MINISTER ALSO ANNOUNCED THAT, WITH APPROVAL OF GOVERNOR GENERAL, FOUR REFERENDUM PROPOSALS ON CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES WOULD BE PUT TO PEOPLE AT SAME TIME ON MAY 18; SIMULTANEOUS ELECTIONS OF SENATE AND HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES; ELECTORATES OF EQUAL POPULATION; PROVISION OF FEDERAL FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE DIRECT TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT; AND REDUCTION IN NUMBER OF STATES APPROVING CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE FROM FOUR TO THREE. (FIFTH REFERENDUM PROPOSAL ON EXCHANGE OF POWERS BETWEEN FEDERAL AND STATE GOVERNMENTS DID NOT COMPLETE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS IN TIME.)

3. ELECTIONS FOR HALF OF SENATE IN ANY CASE HAD TO BE HELD AND RESULTS REPORTED TO GOVERNOR GENERAL BY JUNE 30. THIS HAS MEANT THAT MID-MAY DATE WAS INEVITABLE. RECENT UNCERTAINTY RESULTED FROM DECISION OF OPPOSITION PARTIES IN SENATE TO OPPOSE AND DELAY DRAFT REFERENDUM PROPOSALS. UNDER CONSTITUTION, REFERENDUM PROPOSALS CAN BE PUT TO PEOPLE DESPITE SENATE OPPOSITION.

4. OPPOSITION PARTIES HAVE BEEN MOVED TO OPPOSE REFERENDUM PROPOSALS BOTH ON GROUNDS OF PRINCIPLE (GOVERNMENT ATTEMPTED TO RUSH COMPLEX CONSTITUTIONAL PROPOSALS THROUGH BOTH HOUSES) AND ON GROUNDS OF TACTICS (OPPOSITION MAY UPSET AND UNNERVE GOVERNMENT PARTY, PARTICULARLY AS MANY ALP FIGURES OPPOSE COUPLING SENATE ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUM PROPOSALS). FEDERAL SECRETARY OF ALP, DAVID COMBE, TOLD EMBOFF MAR 6 HE PERSONALLY OPPOSED TO COUPLING SENATE ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUM PROPOSALS, AS RESULT LIKELY TO DAMAGE ALP PROSPECTS IN SENATE ELECTIONS. COMBE ANTICIPATES DEFEAT OF ALL FOUR REFERENDUM PROPOSALS, ALTHOUGH OTHER ALP FIGURES, AND SOME LIBERALS AS WELL, BELIEVE REFERENDA ON SIMULTANEOUS ELECTIONS AND DIRECT FEDERAL FINANCIAL AID TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT COULD SCRAPE THROUGH.

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5. SENATE ELECTION PROSPECTS FOR GOVERNMENT ARE NOT PARTICULARLY BRILLIANT. ALP HAS 12 SENATE SEATS UP FOR RE-ELECTION, COMPARED TO 11 FOR LIBERALS, THREE FOR COUNTRY PARTY, THREE FOR DEMOCRATIC LABOR PARTY, AND ONE INDEPENDENT. THERE ARE FIVE SENATORS TO BE ELECTED IN EACH OF SIX AUSTRALIAN STATES. AS RESULTS GOVERNED BY PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION, IT IS NEARLY CERTAIN THAT ALP, ON ONE HAND, AND LIBERAL-COUNTRY

PARTY-DLP, ON OTHER, WILL EACH WIN TWO SEATS IN EACH
STWTE, WITH REAL BATTLEGROUND OVER "FIFTH" SENATE
SEAT IN EACH STATE. THESE SIX KEY SENATE SEATS ARE OF
VITAL IMPORTANCE TO GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION ALIKE AS
IN PRESENT SENATE ALP HAS 26 SEATS, LIBERALS HAVE 21,
COUNTRY PARTY HAS FIVE, DLP HAS FIVE, AND INDEPENDENTS
HAVE THREE. WHEN OPPOSITION PARTIES AGREE, WITH SENATE
CONSTITUTED AS AT PRESENT, THEY CAN USUALLY BRING WITH
THEM ONE OF INDEPENDENTS (SENATOR TOWNLY OF TASMANIA)
IN OPPOSING LABOR GOVERNMENT MEASURES. SIGNIFICANT
PORTION OF LABOR GOVERNMENT PROGRAM HAS BEEN BLOCKED
IN THIS WAY OVER PAST 15 MONTHS OR SO.

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NSAE-00 NSC-07 PA-04 RSC-01 PRS-01 SPC-03 SS-20

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6. VIEW OF MOST OBSERVERS AT THIS POINT IS THAT, WHILE
THERE MAY BE SHIFTS BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION
IN SOME OF SENATE RACES, THESE CHANGES WILL LARGELY
BALANCE OUT, AND SENATE WILL CONTINUE TO HAVE A POTEN-
TIAL OPPOSITION MAJORITY AFTER ELECTIONS. EVEN USUALLY
PRO-LABOR COMMENTATOR IN CANBERRA TIMES, DAVID SOLOMON,

WROTE MAR 22 THAT "GOVERNMENT STANDS TO GAIN SEVERAL SEATS AT THE ELECTION BUT HAS NO HOPE OF WINNING A MAJORITY IN THE SENATE." REASON IS NOT ONLY RECENT SHOWING OF LABOR GOVERNMENT IN POLLS BUT ALSO AUSTRALIAN TRADITION THAT ALL GOVERNMENTS LOSE GROUND IN BY-ELECTIONS AND, IN RECENT YEARS, IN OFF-YEAR SENATE ELECTIONS.

7. DLP IS LIKELY TO LOSE TWO AND PERHAPS ALL THREE OF ITS SEATS UP FOR RE-ELECTION. HOWEVER, LIBERALS AND COUNTRY PARTY MIGHT TAKE AT LEAST TWO OF DLP SEATS, LEAVING GOVERNMENT-OPPOSITION BALANCE CHANGES SUPERFICIALLY LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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BUT NOT SUBSTANTIVELY. OF GREAT INTEREST WILL BE SENATE ELECTIONS IN QUEENSLAND AND WESTERN AUSTRALIA, WHERE JOINT COUNTRY PARTY - DLP SLATE RUNNING. IF JOINT SLATE DOES WELL, IMPETUS TO FULL FUSION OF COUNTRY PARTY AND DLP WILL INCREASE, WITH OPTENTIAL LONG-TERM IMPACT ON PARTY ALIGNMENTS.

8. CONCERN OF ALP PROFESSIONALS SUCH AS FEDERAL SECRETARY DAVID COMBE IS THAT PEOPLE WILL VOTE SUBSTANTIALLY AGAINST REFERENDUM PROPOSALS AND THAT ENOUGH OF THEM WILL VOTE AGAINST ALP AS WELL TO PRESENT POSSIBILITY OF NET LABOR LOSSES IN SENATE ELECTIONS. COMBE COMMENTS THAT PROSPECTS FOR SENATE ELECTIONS WERE NOT GOOD FOR LABOR IN ANY CASE, BUT ADDITION OF COMPLEX REFERENDUM PROPOSALS FURTHER DAMAGES ALP PROSPECTS IN SENATE ELECTIONS. ADDITIONAL CONCERN OF COMBE (AND SENATOR TONY MULVIHILL OF NEW SOUTH WALES HAS EXPRESSED SAME CONCERN) IS THAT IF LABOR DOES VERY POORLY IN SENATE ELECTION, WINNING NO MORE THAN 13 SENATE SEATS, OPPOSITION WILL SENSE TRIUMPH AND BECOME REALLY OBSTRUCTIONIST IN SENATE, PERHAPS REFUSING TO PASS BUDGET BILLS. WHITLAM ARGUMENT OVER PAST 15 MONTHS, THAT HE HAD "MANDATE" IN ELECTIONS OF DECEMBER, 1972, COULD EASILY BE ANSWERED THAT SENATE HAS A DIFFERENT AND MORE RECENT "MANDATE" FROM PEOPLE. RESULTING DEADLOCK, IN THIS PESSIMISTIC VIEW, COULD BRING ON EARLY DOUBLE DISSOLUTION, WITH UNPREDICTABLE CONSEQUENCES FOR LABOR GOVERNMENT.

9. THERE IS SOME EVIDENCE THAT OPPOSITION PARTIES ALREADY SENSE PROSPECT OF VICTORY. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES HAS BEEN SCENE OF TUMULTOUS AND OCCASIONALLY SCURRILOUS DEBATE IN LAST FEW DAYS, IN WHICH NORMALLY QUIET AND WELL-BEHAVED LIBERAL LEADERS HAVE BEEN DEFINITELY ON THE ATTACK. OUTCOME OF WESTERN AUSTRALIAN STATE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

MAR 30 (WHERE PRESENT ALP STATE GOVERNMENT WILL
PROBABLY BE DEFEATED) AND SENATE ELECTIONS MAY 18
WILL HAVE POTENTIALLY DECISIVE EFFECT ON PROSPECTS
FOR FEDERAL LABOR GOVERNMENT.

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